

Facts about Tuberculosis

What is Tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (which is commonly referred to as TB) is an infectious disease, which is spread by bacteria called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. It is not an incurable disease. This disease commonly affects lungs and spreads from one person to another just like common cold. Once these bacteria are inhaled they can be neutralized by the defense system of the body and no problems may arise or within a few months this may result in setting up of the disease. Some times TB remains inactive in the body without producing any symptoms and a few years later it can become active when defense system of the body weakens due to certain disorders.

Almost all children are vaccinated against TB a few years after birth or at the age of twelve years- this vaccine is called BCG. This BCG vaccine may not provide complete protection but it does help body in fighting TB.

What are the symptoms and how they are identified?

Although TB can affect any part of the body but lungs and lymph glands are more commonly involved. The most common symptom is Cough- some times the sputum may have bloodstains. The other symptoms are pain chest, loss of appetite and weight and fever. If TB affects lymph glands, swellings appear in the neck. The diagnosis of TB can be made with the help of Chest X-Ray and examination of sputum.

Can I transmit this disease to others?

If the sputum you produce contains TB organisms in high concentration then you can transmit TB to others- in such a situation your physician may refer to you as 'sputum positive'. In order to prevent transmission of TB to other persons please cover your mouth and nose with a tissue paper, dispose it off by carefully throwing it in the dustbin and wash your hands afterwards. The fear of transmission of TB diminishes within a few days of commencement of treatment and is almost nil after two weeks.

Can my disease affect my family members?

Yes, and they have to undergo physical examination to rule out the possibility of TB. Usually the chances are remote. Every family member undergoing clinical checkup for TB is subjected to Chest X-Ray and young persons and children have to undergo a skin test, which is not painful. If the skin test turns out to be negative then a person is considered free from TB and for future prophylaxis he is subjected to BCG vaccination.

If the skin test turns out to be positive then there are two possibilities, either the person has already received BCG vaccination or has suffered from TB earlier. Usually the condition does not warrant any treatment but the person has to be kept under observation. Those persons who are apparently healthy but if the suspicion index of their suffering from active TB in future is high, they are provided treatment for prevention of TB.

What is the treatment?

For treating TB, drugs are provided for a period of six to nine months. This treatment can be provided either at home or if a person is sick and there are chances of transmission of TB to others then the patient may be hospitalized. No extra precautions like of separate utensils are needed.

Can there be any side effects of this treatment?

Due to some of the drugs used for treating TB the color of patients urine can turn orange to red. The soft contact lenses can turn colorless. Usually the drugs used for treating TB do not

create any problems but if you notice any discoloration around eyes or skin, pruritis, malaise or lethargy or problems with vision then you must contact your physician immediately. Only he can determine the drug causing side effects and assess the need for modifications in treatment.

Do I require any special diet?

No, there is no need for any special diet but a good diet certainly aids early recovery.

Can I continue with my job?

Please enquire about this from your treating physician. Some times the disease does not require any discontinuation of job. In certain situations interruption of job is required till the risk of transmission of disease to others is controlled or when you yourself decide that now you can resume your job. The regular intake of drugs results in cure and this fact must be explained to the employers.

How long will I have to remain (in touch) in the hospital?

For a minimum period of six months to a maximum period of nine months – till the treatment is complete. Most of the patients have to visit hospital once every three or four months in the beginning and later on this period may increase. Afterwards in some hospitals one may have to visit hospital once or twice in a year for a period of two years.

Sexual contact and contraception:

Usually TB does not require any interruption of the sexual contact, but those people who can infect others; it is advisable to avoid any sexual contact with in first two weeks of treatment. The drugs containing Rifampicin, Rifinah, Rimactazid, and Rifater usually contain a drug, which can interfere with the action of oral contraceptives. If you are using oral contraceptives during treatment for TB you should discuss with your physician about other methods of contraception.

Remember:

There should be no interruption in intake of medicines. If you forget to take medicines in the morning, do take them at any other time during the day. Always maintain a stock of the drugs- procure fresh supply before the current stock gets exhausted. If you are concerned about the symptoms of your illness, talk to your physician about them. Treatment of tuberculosis is possible only if you take medicines regularly and for the specified period. Do not discontinue treatment if you start feeling better initially. Stop treatment only when your physician tells you to do so.

For information on TB and other lung diseases contact: British Lung Foundation, 8 Peterborough Mews, London SW6 3BL or Telephone: 071 371 7734